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Sermon
Rev. Howard N Brown
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If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine.

John VII. 17.

One of the results of the more accurate knowledge being gathered in our day will be to give those who come after us a greater respect than the present generation has manifested for the practical sagacity of human nature throughout the past. The half informed mind is quick apt to exclaim, with Shakespeare's spirit of mischief. "Lord, what fools these mortals be!": and the intellectual life of our time has shown a strong tendency to conclude that the world hitherto has been altogether the victim

of superstitions and illusions. But further investigation along almost all lines of study shows that ~~after all~~ falsehood and folly have by no means held ~~held such~~ entire sway of the mind of preceding ages. ~~It was the fashion, not so~~ long ago, to treat all those traditions of the race which lie back of its authentic history, as wholly untrustworthy. Every story of prehistoric ~~times and~~ events was called a ~~must be a~~ myth, of some kind, - a mere figment of the imagination. But discoveries have been made which have produced a strong reaction against this supposition, and it now seems probable that in the end, nearly all those traditions of early races will be found to contain some kernel of historic fact. --- When our Meteorologists ~~meteorologists~~ began to study the ~~changes of~~ weather, they were not inclined ~~to pay much heed to the maxims which~~

walked, and which have produced in them a people remarkable for their physical, no less than for their mental characteristics. At least the founders of that ritual based their rules of conduct upon some very keen and accurate observation of the life about them, and not merely, as is too often supposed, on fanciful theories and conjectures. The more we know of the life that has preceded our own, of human nature in the past, and the better we understand what has grown out of the experience of mankind, the more certain it becomes that the majority of men in all ages have looked upon the world about them with honest, serious eyes; desiring not to be cheated by specious illusions, but to discover the facts of existence in conformity to which their welfare must be formed. It is still the weakness of reformers that in their zeal to establish the new and better order of things of which they have

concerned. They must pour scorn and
contempt upon the ~~advocates of an older order~~ systems by which their fathers lived,
as if their latter were only foolish and
depraved: and the reforming modern spirit
has been somewhat over hasty in concluding
that the men of former ~~ages~~ times had small
reason for their faith that was in them;
~~idea what they were talking about.~~ The
argument against the Christianity of the
church, based upon the assumption that during
the first Christian centuries there was no
critical habit of sifting facts from appearances
appears to me to be much overstrained and
~~seems to me but poorly founded.~~ It is
~~a pity with that doctrine of the~~
"saving remnant," which has been preached
in rather too much arrogance of spirit,
as who should say "We are the chosen few,"
~~to render it entirely acceptable.~~ The truth
is, as I suppose that the mass of men have
always been anxious to get at the facts of
life, and in nowise solicitous to believe a

lie, if they were able to detect it. Though they have been credulous and weak, yet when we test, here and there, what their experience has builded, it is found to be so surprisingly true and strong, that ~~the presumption~~ on the question of life's main and vital facts, we ~~is favorable, to~~ ~~not against the reception of~~ can hardly suppose them to have been very far ~~their testimony on all questions of fact possessing~~ astray. ~~and deep & vital importance~~ I do not say that because the records of the past are full of accounts of the visible appearance of spiritual forms, this witness to the life of the soul apart from the body stands entirely above the possibility of mistake. I do say however that such evidence is entitled to far more respect than it has received from the modern reason. I do not pretend to separate between delusion and reality in ~~all~~ those tales of the supernatural which abound throughout the history of the church. But I consider it far more

probable than not, that there lies hid a solid foundation of ~~fact~~ reality, to which we shall one day dig down through the drift of centuries, and to find their laws and promises of the very deepest significance.

~~However the point I wish to make is~~ Whenever men have been betrayed into superstitious ideas and practices, it has been, I think ~~that men have gone astray therefore,~~ not so much through inability to see the facts of life as these are disclosed to the ordinary sight, but through inadequate interpretation of these facts, ~~by reason of general systems~~ and their inferences from the ~~and theories.~~ of imperfect theories which they had made. If we were to find to-day in an Egyptian tomb, the records of an Astronomer written 3000 years ago, setting forth the position and progress of a comet which he had observed, we should have no hesitation in accepting that as a true record. But if added to that, we found a theory and exposition of the motion of comets according to Egyptian notions, it would not

command much serious attention. It is on its theological or doctrinal side, that the ~~life and~~ thought of the past has been chiefly deficient. Without doubt, the foolish and imperfect beliefs of men have given them a strong tendency to discover facts in agreement with these beliefs: and thus their eyes often have been sometimes deceived by the presuppositions occupying their minds. But is it possible that these false beliefs could have grown up in the first instance, otherwise than as wrong interpretations put upon actual occurrences? It is said that even in dreams, the mind originates nothing, but only puts together in different fashion and sequence the pictures caught in waking moments. How then can we refer to fancy alone the origin of that great class of alleged occurrences commonly called supernatural? As well may we imagine that a tree has grown

to full stature upon naked rock, with no seed to start from, and no soil to feed its life, as to suppose that a race of men, - always in the main honest and sane, has produced out of its imagination all these beliefs touching the spiritual world, which the faith of the ages has so tenaciously held, ~~found general credence~~, absolutely without ~~the hint or support of actual fact~~. It is to me a thing incredible, that without even the least communication from an unseen world to give it an idea and hope of immortal life, the human mind should have come to form the unbelieving ~~evidence of the~~ senses, with a clear assurance of immortality. The theories of human nature that are diverse to show how this might have come about, are to me stranger and more miraculous than the facts which they assume to explain. men easily distort ~~A candid observation~~ or displace the impressions made upon them by the ~~of human life to-day~~ lands I think to Southward ~~Universe~~ Universe. But fundamentally ~~common~~ are that strange occurrences like

place from time to time; as if there were
I think, all that they know or think comes from
in the mind powers of faculty and force which
some kind that the outward Universe has given. The
we have not yet learned to bring forth from their
possibilities of the spiritual life chiefly arise, because
hiding place. But whenever such an occasion
whenever man has come in contact with a new spiritual,
is called, then you will see springing up about
it, then, springing up about it and over it
it and over it, like vegitation over a
fountain in the desert, a new theology or
has straightway grown to portentous height.
philosophy. Men must explain this fact; they
must have a whole new theory of the
Universe adjusted to this occasion. And so, then they
fall to quarrelling over their theories, and they
split up into contending schools of thought; till
the new spring of the water of life that had
appeared is trampled under foot, choked up,
and forgotten: and by consequence the vitality
of thought which once
soon departs from those systems, which mark
marked
the place of its appearance, so that they become
little more than dead monuments of a life
once fresh and vigorous. - This tendency of
human nature, to speculate about doctrines

till it has lost its hold upon the living reality, is very plainly manifest in the world as we see it and know it, and we may safely assume that it has been the source of most errors throughout the past. For much theology has been the bane of the church. Again and again its life has been all but throttled and extinguished by the load of useless ~~doctrine~~ dogmas packed upon it. We need not doubt for an instant the existence of a real basis for the beliefs and customs that have grown together into the various systems of religion. Inspiration; Immortality; the Ministrations of a Holy Spirit; these words do not suggest mere vain imaginations of a credulous mind, but sources of spiritual light and power which have been abundantly verified in the experience and observation of mankind. But there is a constant tendency of the intellectual life

to overlay and obscure this source
of the highest help, with schemes of salvation
and systems of ~~theology~~ belief in defence of which
the mind is drawn away from living contact
with spiritual truth.

It has seemed necessary in part
this side of the case first, in order to arrive
at some just estimate of the place and importance
of doctrines or creeds in the religious life.
We must admit that the speculative side
of religion shows its weakest point, when it is
most liable to go astray. If men would only
continue to pray out of sincere and humble hearts
they would find the blessing which comes in
answer to prayer. But when they set up a
Doctrine of prayer, assuming to explain fully
the nature of God and the nature of man,
and how prayer opens the gates of heavenly
mercy, they rarely involve themselves in

~~fatal difficulties~~, ~~But now~~ dear sir, though the doctrines of the church have been perhaps, the greatest stumbling blocks, we do not mend matters by going to the opposite extreme, and saying "We want no doctrines; we will sweep them all away, and will have a church without theology or creed." Do but consider that nowhere is any search for new truth possible without at least some provisional working theory to go upon; In natural science the reason groups together such facts as it has obtained, and draws from them conclusions that point to the existence of other facts, for whose existence it then proceeds to ~~explore~~ search. - It arranges the known members of the Solar system in a certain theoretical order, and ~~then~~ says "If this be the true order, there should be another planet to complete the series." Then it turns its telescopes to

the place where that planet should be, and
makes the discovery towhich a theory has led
the way.- Precisely so in Religion, the Doctrines
of the intellect are the paths that lead the heart
on from one to another discovery of spiritual
facts and realities. ~~The mind, having tried~~
~~and proven its first step in the spiritual~~
~~life, must then ask and answer at least~~
~~some questions concerning the spiritual Universe,~~
~~by which to guide its search for the next step~~
~~upon its journey.~~ The chart by which a discoverer
shapes his course in unknown lands or waters
may be a very poor one; but, at least, from
the conformation of mountains and valleys, of
bays and headlands that he has seen, he
deduces some expectation of what is still before
him, and directs his course hither or thither, as
this probable shelter from a storm, or that
possible supply of his necessities. So has
mankind been led forward from one to another

triumph of spiritual experience by the doctrines that have mapped out for it in advance the possible achievements before it. ~~a spiritual embrace of heaven~~, The labor that has gone to the making of a theology for the church has not been labor thrown away, but in this instance as elsewhere men have been obeying the necessities of their situation. If a bad or outgrown doctrine is as a dead weight to hinder and chill religious progress, not less is a good doctrine, now and again, the very cordial which warms frozen ~~or~~ fainting hearts into new life, and carries them forward from desolate places to homes of light and cheer. A church which has no theology to preach and to live by, ~~but only certain pietistic forms of faith which it keeps locked away in some museum of sacred venerable antiquities~~, has, I fear, however prosperous it may

be in the present, lost its hold upon the future. It is made a boast that in certain places one never hears doctrinal sermons, ~~preached~~ in commendation, and it is said, of more than one pulpit that though it is undoubtedly founded upon theology of a somewhat offensive kind, yet neither that, nor any other theology, is thrust obtruded upon the attention of the worshipper. I cannot think that this is a satisfactory view of what the Church is set to do. Where no doctrines are carefully taught or vitally believed, there may be of course much piety and spiritual communion. But this is not likely to be in that place much pressing forward to new spiritual conquests over old weakness and sin. I cannot think that they are wise who regard this endeavour to spread abroad among the people enlightened religious beliefs, more in accord with the best intelligence and consciences of our time, as a matter of no consequence ~~in agreement with a finer moral sense than that of the Middle Ages, and in~~

~~harmony with a scientific truth which~~
~~is sure to be found at last upon every mind.~~
~~We do not~~ pretend that a belief or doctrine
of any kind can be made to answer in place
of that spiritual experience which is the
final witness of God in the human soul. - But
we do declare that every where souls are sitting
in darkness through ignorance of the possibility
of light; and that the preaching up and down
the land of a really inspiring doctrine about
God has been and will continue to be the
moving force that draws minds to make
trial of a new and better way.

~~Have we not followed this train of~~
~~thought far enough to be able to see with~~
some degree of clearness the point at which
the doctrines of the Church cease to be a
help and become a hindrance to spiritual
growth? The true office of a belief is to
~~lead the~~ way to some new experience of

We find then, that there is always a certain peril in doctrinal statements, as tending to obscure and distort the great facts of the religious life, and yet that the Church could not live without some kind of creed; more or less formal expression of its beliefs. What then is the true position to assume with regard to the doctrines of Christendom? It is very simple. This namely; that all such formulas are to be held somewhat as provisional statements of the truth, the test of which comes always in life and experience. Whosoever will do the will of God, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it is of God. Then is the ground, and the only final ground, of religious attitude. What are the facts of the religious life? That is the first great question. Whether or not we can [illegible] these facts is a [illegible] question. Chiefly

of internal because men are partial
& placations may lead the way to a new and
deeper spiritual experience. — But all that
in terms of this notion of sin must land
to confusion as that from the beginning it
has been the test of experience upon which
this religious faith has really stood. It was
not, wholly because the traditions of their fathers taught
them to pray, but because strength did
come to them in answer to their
prayers. that men of early ages continued
the practice of their religious rites. When a
band of men and women shut up within
hostile lines, as was more than one company
of English people during the Indian Mutiny;
for many days and weeks hunting for
relief from constant danger, and seeing almost
every hour some member of their little
army perish from wounds or disease; and
when their distressed souls turn again

and again to the Library of those Church,
finding, as often as they met "to together,
new courage and hope to support their
trials, there is a hint of what the basis
and foundation of religion has been throughout
the many ages before our time.—

Protestantism has taught great numbers
of people to rely upon the Bible as the one
support of religious hope and aspiration.
The Bible has been and will continue of
inestimable service to the higher life of the
soul. but it is by no means the chief support
even of that religion which thinks itself
wholly dependent on scripture texts. The
grain that each one finds through obedience to the
laws of the Spirit, is the one sure warrant
of the promises of religion which we doubt can
successfully impeach. When we give liberal
faith are reproached for weakening the
authority of the great Charter of our Christian

life by admitting that there are errors in our sacred writings, do not that disturb us for a single moment. The Bible tells us what great souls have seen and found obeying the will of God as that is written in the higher impulses and longings of our souls. The real ground of our hope is not in blind belief that every word of the Bible must be true, but in following after this God your prophets, and proving, each one in his degree, that the rewards of the spirit do not fail.

The world is always troubled by a class of people, who must have their uses. Since nothing that the Lord has made was made in vain, but who think that the end of all God's work is to provide a set of theories about life that are logically perfect, and who, if they can find any flaw or inconsistency in a religious doctrine, brand it at once as being wholly untrustworthy

and unsound. We might leave them people to find out for themselves the mistake they are making, with small compunction for the suffering ~~which~~ that their intellectual vanity is like to bring upon them, were it not for those honest and humble souls which are betrayed by them into a false creed.

I suppose no man can count how many there are at the present day who think that nothing is possible to them, religiously, unless they can find a dogma about God which perfectly answers all their questions, and who are constantly striving, most eagerly and anxiously, in far off intellectual fields for what lies close at hand within the bounds of their daily experience. Does the chemist let all his experiments in combining the different elements wait for a perfectly satisfactory theory of molecular action? Is any one timid about lighting a

candle at night fall, because the relation and the action of light are still so much shrouded from our understandings by a veil of mystery? Yet in neither of these cases would there be a greater folly than that of waiting for a perfect theory of religion, before making any serious test of the worth and power of the religious life. We do not know much of the Being and attributes of the divine mind, and it is easy enough to ask questions which our faith cannot answer. But we know enough to begin to try to live earnestly and faithfully on the belief that Goodness is supreme, that Love is stronger than hate, and that a Providence wiser than our forethought watches over all our ways. This experiment in using the faith that has come into our soul, imperfect as that faith may be as yet, is for us the first necessity: of far

consequence
~~confidence~~ than to make the deepest and profoundest philosophy of Christianity which any mortal sage can put before us. — The proof we most want comes not at the end of a logical demonstration, but when we have time to come back to ourselves; when out of our weakness we have looked up and said from our inmost souls "God help me;" when in presence of some deep injury we have stifled our resentments, and made room in our hearts for charitable thoughts; when being perplexed and & baffled about our way, we have cast ourselves upon an overruling wisdom for guidance, and found ourselves safely and surely led. — These are the demonstrations which always have seemed, and will suffice today to convince the heart that it is within the keeping of an Almighty love. It is wonderful how all those problems that bewilder our

intricate when we try to comprehend it
Universal life, mull away and cross to
be troublesome as we deal with them in our
daily duties. — How to reconcile and balance
all these conflicting elements and opposing
sides of being, so that they shall lie, ready
on all clear and open to our understanding,
there is a task which no theory of existence
has thus far begun to accomplish. And yet as
each day rises upon us, and we stand at a
new center where these intricate lines
of destiny meet and cross, even with
our little wit we do succeed in unravelling
these tangled snarls, and in weaving them
into something like an orderly pattern. —

Almost at times it seems as if we
did not need at all the dilemma that
[illegible]
discipline and experience; as if it were better
to take up, day by day, the duties that

may come to us, and bother our heads with nothing that may lie above or beyond their reach. - But the attempt to confine oneself thus to what is called life's practical side must in the end defeat itself: for a large part of our ability to deal wisely with all practical questions comes from our underlying faith in the general soundness and integrity of all that God has established; and when once that faith is weakened within us, our abilities are apt to fly in pieces like an overdriven wheel. There is much food for reflection in the fact that whereas any dumb beast, plunged for the first time into water, will strike forth and swim, man, the superior animal, under such circumstances will almost invariably drown. His greater intelligence, which gives him a more vivid sense of the danger in which he is placed, so paralyzes his faculties that he is incapable of putting forth the instinctive

efforts of the brute. So in life, knowing better than beasts and birds the scope and power of the forces that surround us, we cannot affix their example. Live wholly absorbed in the passing moment and our immediate surroundings. We must have some knowledge as to what these great powers of being mean and intend, or they frighten us, dishearten us, and turn our ~~weakness~~ many strength to weakness. —

And here we find the glorious promise written in the words of Christ; "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine." It is not only that obedience to the law of the spirit brings peace or comfort, but it yields mental and spiritual enlightenment. They who go forward when Christ has led the way, see and know the truths he taught; and in fact ~~I suppose~~ there is no other way by which this truth can be well learned. Our conceit of the power and influence of what we distinguish as

"intellect" is apt to be beyond all rightful measure of its usefulness.- Not long since, when industrial education was first talked about, great was the scorn of many a bookish man for this effort to lower the standards of intellectual culture. But it was soon proven that children whom the bookish man could not touch, in this fashion were aroused to a new thirst for knowledge: and now the education of the brain through the hand has become one of the commonplaces of the philosophy of education.- In the higher life of the soul, the light of knowledge comes not alone from reasoning upon our circumstances and surroundings, but from faithful doing of the work which God puts into ~~our~~ hands. Then are insights which come from living the life of love and patience and purity which Christ has shown us. such as transcend all human philosophy.

Indeed no intellectual vision is anything more
than a bright dream, ~~and~~ a brilliant picture of
of which may be true till it has been certified
to the heart by those deeper perceptions born
from sincere effort to do the will of God in
our daily life. Obey this divine law, then, that
makes itself known to every conscientious ~~soul of man~~; not
only that you may escape the penalties of disobedience,
but that you may know of the doctrine; not
merely that you may have peace with your fellow
man and on about you a happier and a
better world, but that you may find the earth
full of the ~~thy~~ presence and the ~~power~~ glory of God; may
be assured of a spiritual universe of
which outward nature is but the shadow and
reflection; and may behold in the human soul
a life by its very nature immortal
indestructible, Eternal - destined for those
everlasting joys and blessings to which
Christ has led the way.